



State of Wisconsin  
Department of Health Services

Tony Evers, Governor  
Kirsten L. Johnson, Secretary

Public Service Commission of Wisconsin  
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July 7, 2023

Chairperson Rebecca Cameron Valcq  
Public Service Commission of Wisconsin  
State of Wisconsin

Re: Broadband and Digital Equity Planning

Dear Chairperson Valcq,

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services' (DHS) mission is to protect and promote the health and safety of the people of Wisconsin. High-speed, affordable internet is critical to our goal of fostering healthy communities, addressing health disparities, ensuring access to health care, and helping everyone in Wisconsin live their best lives. Across the state, people use the internet to access health education materials, connect with health care providers, and manage their health and nutrition benefits. For older adults and people with disabilities, access to broadband helps them stay safe, live independently by using assistive technology, and keep in touch with loved ones and caregivers.

We thank the Public Service Commission (PSC) of Wisconsin for the opportunity to highlight existing initiatives and how access to high-speed and affordable internet can promote better health for the people in our state.

### Public Health

Public health activities lay the groundwork for healthy communities to keep people out of doctors' offices. These activities protect us from diseases and injury we cannot prevent alone. They also help us change behaviors which could cause us harm. This includes things like helping to prevent the spread of diseases; protecting our environment, workplaces, housing, food, and water; promoting healthy behaviors; monitoring population health; mobilizing communities for action; responding to disasters; and assuring high quality medical services.

To support the public health of Wisconsin communities, people rely on broadband access as a vital service to help improve their health outcomes, as highlighted in Wisconsin's [2020 Statewide Health Assessment](#). Broadband is classified by the [Federal Communications Commission](#) (FCC) as a social determinant of health, meaning that access to broadband leads to better health outcomes. For example, the FCC found that broadband access led to a 9.6% lower diabetes prevalence.

DHS' Division of Public Health leverages broadband across multiple statewide programs to:

- Provide access to timely and high-quality information, data, and government services over the internet for consumers and partners.
- Facilitate access to internet-enabled devices. For example, the WisTech program provides assistive technology to maintain or improve the functionality of people with disabilities.
- Teach digital skills, provide technical support, and educate people about online security.
- Help address social isolation and support people as they age in place.

Broadband also supports public health through telehealth services to directly connect people with a medical professional. The service allows for health care to meet people where they are at, no matter where they live, so long as their internet can support it. The use of telehealth services allows people to:

- Access medication and treatment through electronic visits and consultation.
- Reduce delays in receiving appropriate care, including urgent, specialty care.
- Reduce overuse of emergency care.
- Improve the ability to receive preventive services, through pre-visit screening, vaccination reminders, and telehealth wellness visits.

### **Medicaid Services**

Wisconsin Medicaid is the state's largest health insurer. More than one million Wisconsinites with low-income or those who have a disability rely on our state Medicaid program for high-quality health care coverage, long-term care, and other services that promote physical and mental health and well-being. According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), people on Medicaid and Medicare make up two-thirds of those without access to the internet at home. Anecdotally, our partners have shared stories of Medicaid members participating in counseling sessions from a McDonalds parking lot using the restaurant's free Wi-Fi. Being able to access health care benefits through broadband supports health equity to ensure members with low-income and who live in rural areas can also receive high-quality, affordable health care when and where they need it.

BadgerCare Plus is a Medicaid program that provides health care services to children and adults in low-income households. This program expanded access to telehealth appointments and the use of assistive technology to allow members to receive services without having to travel to a clinic. Medicaid covers the cost of cellular services for assistive technology for long-term care members; however, federal law does not currently allow Medicaid to cover broadband services.

DHS recognizes that digital literacy and skills are essential to fostering independence. Which is why Wisconsin's Medicaid and FoodShare programs let people apply for and manage their health and nutrition benefits online. For example, people can apply for BadgerCare Plus and FoodShare using the ACCESS website or MyACCESS app. Members who do not have internet access can use kiosk and self-help centers set up at local eligibility offices or by partners, such as food pantries and job centers. DHS also partners with Covering Wisconsin, who provides regional enrollment networks across the state so members can obtain assistance applying for benefits wherever they are located. The FoodShare program also relies on the internet to help members through its employment and training component. Members can receive free training on using a computer for job search and enhancing their job skills to find a rewarding career. This program has been helping members to support their families by connecting participants with employers in high demand industries.

### **Care and Treatment Facilities**

DHS' Division of Care and Treatment Services manages and supports seven care and treatment facilities across the state for people with severe psychiatric disorders, intellectual disabilities, behavioral health needs, and substance use disorders. Facilities rely on the internet to use e-consultations for admissions and discharge planning and provide outpatient programming through video calls to assist patients wherever they are. These online interventions often eliminate the need for transportation to a facility or clinic. Online services also assist with scheduling mental and physical health appointments and accessing personal medical information.

As an example, the Central Wisconsin Center intensive treatment program works with people five years of age and older with intellectual disabilities and co-occurring mental health or behavior disorder, leans heavily on parents, guardians, and external partners to participate in screenings, case meetings, and

trainings in the treatment plan. Clients come from anywhere in Wisconsin, making in-person training difficult in terms of time, travel, and cost. The more our external partners can engage in online services like Teams and Zoom, with good quality connections, the more they can benefit from their stay at the center.

At Mendota Mental Health Institute, patients learn how to use computers and digital technology with broadband access. These skills are easily transferable and applicable regardless of discharge location, provided they have continuous access to broadband.

### **Quality Assurance**

To ensure Wisconsinites have access to and can receive high quality health care services no matter where they live, DHS regulates and licenses programs and facilities through its Division of Quality Assurance (DQA). This oversight ensures health care, long-term care, mental health, and substance abuse services programs and facilities are following state and federal rules to protect the health and safety of patients. The results of DQA's work supports patients and their families who rely on high-speed internet access to:

- Research potential care providers, such as nursing homes.
- Conduct video visits and message providers.
- Connect their health records electronically with providers, and other digital interfaces like for emergency care support from first responders, and optimizing operations through electronic management systems.

### **Recommendations for PSC**

To help ensure Wisconsinites have access to health care, services, education, and benefits, DHS recommends the following:

#### **Improve access to telehealth services**

Access to telehealth through high-speed internet reduces barriers for Wisconsinites who need health care. Telehealth also reduces the costs of care and allows patients to seek out treatment when it works best for their schedule and minimize time constraints around typical business day appointments. This makes it critical for PSC to invest in broadband to ensure health care is meeting people where they are when they need it.

#### **Ensure broadband access for Medicaid members**

Medicaid members are eligible for many types of low-income assistance programs. They PSC should help streamline eligibility for broadband assistance plans since these members already qualify for assistance through other state programs. This would make broadband more affordable for members to connect with their health care benefits, services, and programs. This also supports improved health outcomes for our communities.

#### **Advance digital equity**

The [2023 Governor's Health Equity Council Report](#) recommended supporting the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access and the PSC State Broadband Plan, with a focus on improving digital equity. Wisconsinites in both rural and urban areas of Wisconsin have health care needs that often require them to spend time traveling to appointments and navigating a complicated health care system. Telehealth reduces the time burdens of seeking and receiving needed health care services. However, this requires access to affordable, high-speed internet. While rural areas of the state face more widespread challenges in accessing robust broadband infrastructure, people of both urban and rural areas share common barriers to accessing affordable internet service.

Recommendations include:

- Creating a digital equity fund to support digital inclusion activities that lead to all Wisconsinites being fully able to participate in society.
- Starting an internet assistance program to address broadband affordability for low-income families.
- Increasing broadband expansion grant funding across urban and rural communities to improve access to highspeed internet services.
- Supporting PSC's ongoing work to reduce and get rid of barriers to affordable highspeed internet.

#### Improve broadband access for people with disabilities

The Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities (GCPD) recently published [Policy Recommendations for Telehealth and Broadband Access](#). GCPD recognizes broadband connectivity is quickly becoming one of the most basic of human needs. Broadband connectivity provides communication with others, opportunity to grow through education and employment, and connection to essential information and services. Without connectivity, there are people with disabilities who may not have access to information through other means. In addition, this means there are people with disabilities who do not have access to telehealth services.

Recommendations include:

- Investing in broadband infrastructure and cell phone towers in Wisconsin to enable people with disabilities to live independently.
- Providing funds for devices and hotspots to people with disabilities. For example, the Illinois Cares Connection Project offers two bundles (iPad and Android). Participants who do not have internet are offered a year of service. Illinois also has a data system to track activity from referral to fulfillment, tutorial for both bundles, provide telephone technical assistance, and more.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on broadband expansion and digital equity. We appreciate the work of PSC to ensure safe, reliable, affordable, environmentally responsible, and equitable access to broadband services. And we look forward to working with you to ensure our communities are connected to support the health of the people in Wisconsin. Broadband access and affordability are essential so everyone in Wisconsin can access the resources and care they need to live their best lives.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Johnson  
Secretary  
Wisconsin Department of Health Services